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ABSTRACT

Examined in this study are factors affecting the dating and behavior patterns of black single parents. Described and discussed are the influence of childrearing responsibilities, economic factors, class factors, age factors, educational experience, and sexual values of these patterns. Also taken into account are the influences of a child's attitudes or behavior have on a parent's dating patterns and the extent to which single parents form or maintain extended family networks. (EB)

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DATING BEHAVIOR AMONG SINGLE PARENTS: THE CASE OF THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

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Throughout the history of the family in the United States, it has normatively been conceived as being headed by two adults of opposite sexes. The family unit, with one parent as its leader, has been regarded as an aberration whose existence must be due to some human tragedy or personal flaw. In the case of a racial group, such as Blacks, large numbers of single parents among them has led to the pejorative image of its family system as weak or pathological. Recent historical research has refuted the long-standing myth that Black families, in the main, have been headed by women since the demise of slavery. The fairly large numbers of single parent Black families is basically a concomitant of urbanization, industrialization and migration factors.[1]

The alleged pathology of Black single parent families is a long and complex saga which has been dealt with elsewhere.[2] Our concern in this paper is with the middle-class single parent and her/his dating behavior as it is affected by the multiplicity of roles they must play, i.e., parent and dating partner. This report is based on part of a larger study of middle-class Black singles.[3] Using the middle class as our subject population means we do not have to focus largely on the economic problems of raising a child alone. While not that economically secure, most middle-class Black single parents have annual incomes in the range of $9,000-$16,000.[4]

Far from being an aberration, the single parent family is fast becoming the typical Black family. As of 1977 they represented 38 percent of all Black families.[5] By the year 2000 it is estimated they will be a majority of all Black families. Based on recent trends which show that two parent

families among Blacks declined more in the six-year period 1970-1976 than in the preceding 20 years,[6] it presages the beginning of an era in which most children will be raised by only one parent during their formative years. A number of factors are responsible for this transformation of the Black family structure, among them the increase in out-of-wedlock births as a proportion of all births and a spiraling divorce rate.

In the middle-class Black community, almost all the increase in single parent families can be attributed to the increased divorce rate. While some middle-income, single Black women are consciously having a child out of wedlock and others are adopting children, they represent a very small minority of the single parent group. In the years between 1960-1977, the ratio for divorces among Blacks rose by 160 percent. Circa 1977 the Black divorce rate for persons between the ages of 25 and 54 was 28.6.[7] In fact the formerly married Blacks represent the overwhelming majority of those Blacks we classify as single. Moreover, the divorce rate appears to have increased faster among the middle-class group than all others. Another change in previous divorce statistics of most relevance to us is that children are more likely to be involved in the terminated marriage. In 1950, fewer than 30 percent of dissolved marriages involved children, but by 1976 60 percent of Black divorces involved them.[8]

However, those are statistics for the general Black population. If we consider the middle class alone, a different type of picture emerges. Based on a number of empirical sources, including our own, we can construct a profile of the typical middle-class divorced person. As is true of single parents, the prototype of the currently divorced is a woman. Women outnumber men as presently divorced by a ratio of 3-1, due to higher remarriage rates

for males. She most likely married around the age of 23 years or older and remained in that status for less than six years. The median income for the divorcee living in a metropolitan area is approximately $11,000 a year. She has two or more years of college or business education and her former husband the same. Before marriage she had known her husband for two years or less. They both have urban backgrounds and the religious preference is Protestant. Almost a majority of divorced Black women have no children at the time of marital disruption.[9] This is probably due to the very low fertility rate of Black women with some college education: 1.5 children in 1976.[10]

A fact we have not mentioned up to this time is the very high divorce rate of college-educated Black women. When we look at the percent known to have been divorced in 1970 by level of education, we find the highest percentage, 28.6, among Black women with one to three years of college training. The corresponding figures for those with a high school education is 23.3; elementary school completion 21.0.[11] Undoubtedly, some of this unexpected disparity is traceable to the tendency of lower-income Blacks to use separation as their only form of marital dissolution. Still, the divorce rate among middle-class Blacks is twice as high as that of comparable whites. Again, some of this racial difference may be due to the unseen forces of racism and its ramifications in the marital arena. A more plausible explanation, however, is the unbalanced sex ratio, i.e., excess number of women, and the resulting keen competition for men, married or otherwise. In Chavis and Lye's study of educated Black women, while not citing it as a primary reason for their divorce, 56 percent of them believed their husbands had engaged in extramarital relations.[12]

METHODOLOGY

This study consists of a nationwide sample of those Blacks we classified as single, i.e., never married, divorced, separated and widowed. All subjects had to be between the ages of 25-45 years. Previous research had indicated that individuals under the age of 25 could be considered as being in a transitional stage between singlehood and marriage. Persons over the age of 45 had settled into a certain lifestyle and resignation to a single role that markedly differed from younger singles. The subjects had to live in a metropolitan area of over 100,000 population. Most singles live in such areas and those who do not generally lead very different lives. In order to avoid consideration of the economic variables that impinge on one's marital status, it was decided to concentrate exclusively on those Blacks who had obtained four or more years of a college education.

An open-ended questionnaire was developed and sent off to key people in the 25 largest cities in the United States, with a significant Black population. These individuals were asked to distribute it to Blacks who fitted our sample requirements. Out of 1,000 questionnaires distributed, 300 were returned during the years 1976-1978. The author and two interviewers, a male and female, conducted over 100 personal interviews in the San Francisco-Oakland metropolitan area during the same period of time. These members of the sample were selected by using the snowball technique. Each subject was asked to give us the names of friends whom we could contact for an interview. Since the questionnaire return was approximately 80 percent female, we made an extra effort to contact males for the personal interviews--them comprising one half of that group. Single parents were approximately one third of the total subject population. We used a qualitative analysis of our findings in

in the sense that patterns were sought in the interview and questionnaire data rather than a statistical analysis of frequencies or responses.

SINGLE PARENTS AS A LOWER CASTE

Since 98 percent of our single parents are women, our report will of necessity focus on them. When entering the dating game, the newly divorced woman will find that there is a pecking order. All eligible women are ranked according to their constellation of attributes, ranging from physical attractiveness, personality traits and other values, by the men in the pool of eligibles. All attributes being equal, however, the single mother will rank relatively low. Her low evaluation will generally be associated with her status as a single person who has a child. This attitude is best exemplified in statement of one Black male eligible that "all in all I really don't want to deal with a woman who has crumb-crushers if I have any other choice." Some of the problems involved in having a child will be evident later in our discussion. Suffice it to say that the single mother has restrictions on her availability, movements, sexual expression and the like. Men can ignore some of the liabilities but others impinge more directly on them and their priorities.

Not all single mothers have childrearing responsibilities to the same extent. Having a responsible person to care for her child while she dates is easier for women who have an extended family network in her local area. But this is more common to low-income Blacks than the middle class. Due to their greater mobility they are less likely to live in an area with kin who can baby-sit for them. Also, since they were formerly married they may have moved to the husband's place of residence or followed him on a job transfer. Hence, the ability to date may be constrained, more or less, by the availability and cost of child caretakers. However, the ability of eligible men to screen out the single mother as a dating partner is undermined by their

sheer numbers in the dating game. As a young male Ph.D. reported: "There are a limited number of quality Black women to share my life with, especially who don't already have children."

That having a child is becoming less of a barrier in dating opportunities is reported by many of the women in our sample. In response to our question of whether having a child affected her dating opportunities, a 30-year-old psychologist retorted, "I do not believe having children has much effect, if any, on my dating. There are just as many men that prefer a woman with children as do not." In fact, argues one woman, a 35-year-old guidance counselor, "Some men prefer women with children because they like families and want to play with young kids." This may particularly be true of the formerly married man who, for whatever reason, has limited access to and interaction with his own child. However, by general consensus, these women observe that the free-floating single Black male does not want to be bothered with another woman's child.

Class factors tend to differentiate the attitudes and practices of single parents. In the lower class there is often the expectation, on the part of mothers, that she is trading off sexual and domestic services for some financial renumeration if she has a child. While this may occur among middle-class single mothers, it does not appear that common. Most likely she has a sufficient income and her child support payments are probably more reliable than the lower-income mothers. Some of the men in our sample do report sharing baby-sitting expenses or buying the child gifts. Lower-class men are known to define fatherly responsibilities by their relationship to the mother. Thus, they often become surrogate fathers to their sexual consort's children while neglecting their responsibility to the children they procreated. Due to the

different marital patterns of middle-class Blacks and variations in their dating styles, this is not a common practice reported among our respondents.

Other than the liability associated with having children, the single mother is downgraded for a reason endemic to all women: age. The typical divorcee is over 30 years of age when she resumes dating. As a result she is victimized by the tendency of men to link physical attractiveness to the youthful age of a woman. Not only does this affect a woman's opportunity for dates but her chances at a remarriage. This fact is reflected in the statistics on remarriage which show a much higher remarriage rate for middle-class Black men than women. And, when these men remarry the new wife is typically much younger than the former wife. Black women who remain divorced have a higher educational level than those who decide to enter remarriage.[13] Many of the Black women who remain divorced do so by choice. Their higher incomes make them less dependent on a man for financial support.

Other factors which minimize the value of single mothers are more capricious and inconsistently applied. Some men label the single mother as morally stigmatized as a result of the sexual relations with the former husband. Others talk of enlarged vaginas stemming from child birth which make sexual relations less than satisfactory. On the other hand, many men would prefer a woman with a record as a wife and mother than some of the free-floating single women in the dating game. As one man, an urban planner, said: "Give me a woman who has a child any day. At least she's demonstrated the maturity to handle the responsibility of a home and children. And I strongly suspect that some of these single women can't handle no kind of responsibility."

THE DIFFERENCE A CHILD MAKES

Whatever their chances in the dating game, it is quite clear that single mothers are in it in a different way. Dating is more likely to be an expressive than an instrumental activity. Those who have children simply do not have the ardent desire to get married that characterizes their childless counterparts. Part of this difference can be attributed to their having been formerly married. Rainwater once observed that it was more important to have been married than to remain married.[14] Nonetheless, there are distinguishing factors that come from past involvement in the conjugal state. For some women the trauma of the former union can embitter them toward marriage. A number of women commented on the scars left by their marriages. One poignant tale was that of a 37-year-old woman who had helped put her husband through medical school, assisted him in establishing his medical practice and was abandoned after 14 years of marriage. She comments, "After that experience my level of trust in men is very low. Since my divorce I've accumulated a lot of things but they will only be used for me and my children."

Our findings on the single mother's desire to remarry is similar to that of other studies. Most of them did not expect to remarry. We might note that this attitude could reflect their desire to avoid cognitive dissonance. Most may realize that having passed the age of 30, having one or more children, their chances for remarriage are slim. Hence, they bring their attitudes into conformity with the reality of their opportunity structure. On the other hand, the single mother's attitude toward men may be more positive than her childless counterpart. If her negative experiences were with one man, she may not generalize the resulting bitterness toward all men but see him as an exception. The never married woman's negative experience may

have been with a number of different men. Thus, she may be distrustful or defensive with all future male partners.

From the statistical data we know that middle-class Black women do remain unmarried more than similarly situated white women. However, the remarriage rate is considerably higher for young childless divorcees.[15] This suggests that negative experiences in marriage are not a sufficient explanation for the low remarriage rate. Having children and the age at the time of divorce are also important. Bell's study found that the mother role had more importance to Black women than the wife role.[16] It could be that having satisfied the desire to bear and rear children, single mothers find the wife role too unattractive to aspire to for one more try. As a result, we found our young, childless divorcees more eager to remarry. Among our middle-class group they constitute a near majority of the recent divorcees. Another group that remarries at a higher rate are those women with three to five children.[17] Due to the low fertility rate of college-educated women, such women are rare among the group we studied.

In looking at the dating habits of our sample, we saw a number of variations. Most significantly, they did not go out on the typical date as often. Much of their interaction with men was confined to their homes, having dinner, watching television or listening to records. A number of women were simply dropouts from the dating game. Almost all of them held full-time jobs and reported that, along with childrearing chores, they simply did not have time for men. Those who did resume dating after the divorce found they had to make a number of adjustments. The rules of the dating game and the behavior of men had changed considerably. Many who were interested in remarriage discovered that dating was more likely to be defined as opportunities for

sexual dalliance than courtship. Others expressed surprise at the lack of male etiquette in areas such as opening doors, paying for the date and transporting them from their home.

Their standards for mate selection often differed from their never-married peer. Basically, they tended to steer away from the free-floating single male. They preferred men who exhibited qualities of stability and responsibility, who could conceivably make a good father. Some of them even screened out men who had not already been married and had children of their own. Such a qualification is presumably based on the feeling that those men would be more accepting of their children. That is not always the case. Many of those men avoid single mothers because of the perception that the additional cost of more children, should a marriage occur, would be higher than they can bear.

Being a single mother also means discrimination in the selection of friends. As a rule they can no longer circulate in the circles they socialized in when married, due to the threat they represent to married women, different interests, etc. Childless single women are often not deemed desirable because one cannot get reciprocity in baby-sitting from them or they are too busy dating themselves. Hence, their friends come from the network of other single mothers. Some women related that they try to keep a set of platonic male friends to use as a male model for their children. They found these men to be more stable than their lovers and could avoid some of the problems associated with sex that is linked to the non-platonic relationship.

The problems of being a single parent and being in the singles world are illustrated in the case of a 27-year-old Black educator. She had never been married but had brought her teenage brother to live with her. According to her:

I found that my single friends perceived me as 'too busy' and/or unavailable to socialize at times. Yet, this group of people were my peers, not other married couples or single parents who had either younger children than my brother or who were older themselves with adolescent children. Thus, my single friends discriminated against me, at times, and I felt left out. I could not engage in social activities as frequently due to household management and child care responsibilities and maintaining a professional career, which was overwhelming at times. This experience served to sensitize me to the position of single parents, particularly if various support mechanisms are lacking.

THE QUESTION OF SEX

Sexual matters must definitely be handled in a different manner for the single parent than her childless counterpart. There is not only the question of whether to have sex with a man but where or when. The main concern of single mothers is about the type of sexual values they are transmitting to their children. Actually, it is a reflection of the whore-madonna complex. Parents are often seen as asexual by their children and some single mothers feel that any expression of their sexuality will brand them as morally loose and deprive them of the respect of their children. Despite the liberalization of sexual values in recent years, many mothers uphold traditional sexual mores for their children. The woman who is too open with her sexual life is fearful that her child will want to have lovers too.

In our study single mothers did not possess appreciably more conservative sexual standards than other single women. Yet, most were a paragon of circumspection in their sexual life. Many said they confined their sexual activity to places outside their home. According to a 34-year-old nurse: "I do have to curtail my at-home activities and limit my sexual expressions to only those that he can understand and accept. I want him to see plenty of affection demonstrated but that's not always the case." There are numerous cases among our single parent group where men have to engage in a sexual rendezvous at a hotel, another reason why some men rank single mothers as a low priority in the pool of eligible women. Many women cannot afford to leave the children to go off for sexual adventures. A common ruse in such instances is to go to bed with the man in her home but require him to leave before the child awakes.

Of course, there are some parents who do not particularly care about the sexual model they present to their child. Many long-term divorcees, for example, have distinctly more permissive sexual attitudes than never-married women. Having no desire or chance for another marriage, they do not have to pay lip service to the sexually conservative ideals needed to attract a man. Moreover, they may wish to convey those same permissive sexual values to their children. One such case was that of a 32-year-old airline stewardess. She claims that: "I feel people should have sex with whomever is willing or whomever they please. I don't worry about what anybody thinks when it comes to morals, as long as I don't disrespect my child or carry on in her presence, the sky's the limit for me. I have no hang-ups."

On the other hand, there are single mothers who adhere to very conservative non-marital sexual standards. Many of these will be women past the

age of 30 who cannot adjust to the changing sexual standards. In some cases they strongly internalize the sexual mores they convey to their child. To do otherwise, they feel, would seem absurd if they play the moralist while acting differently. If concealed, they feel hypocritical. Single mothers who have very conservative sexual values have a handy excuse with the presence of a child. As long as men attempt seduction in the mother's home, the presence of the child is a convenient, but harmless, rationalization for turning him down. This reason can be used selectively, depending on her desire to engage in sex or not. Some single parents have declined a male request for sex when the only child present was barely months old.

Some single mothers tread a middle course with their sex life. While avoiding open display of her sexual habits, she does attempt to convey to the child that sexual intimacy is a natural expression of a heterosexual relationship. According to a 34-year-old school teacher: "No man has ever stayed one night with my child here. If I'm going to stay overnight with a guy it will be a weekend trip, in which case my daughter will stay with relatives. I've explained to her that sometimes I'll be spending nights out and she understands that and doesn't mind it. We discuss it often and she understands my need as a woman for male company." The problem of sex is not a constant one for all single parents. Often, it will depend on the age and sex of the child. Concern is more keen when it is a teenage daughter than the younger or male child. Regardless, restrained sexual expression continues to be a burden of single parenthood.

THE MALE SINGLE PARENT

If the female-headed household is considered an aberration, the single male parent is truly shocking. Until recent years men had sole responsibility

of their children only in cases of the mother's insanity, death or incarceration. As a result of recent changes in the woman's role and attitudes toward children, over a million children under the age of 18 are in the care of their fathers. Much of the recent increase is due to the phenomena of runaway wives, women who abandon both the husband and children. Approximately 1.5 of Black children in 1976 were living with their fathers.[18] This percentage is a modest decline from other years because of the growing proportion of Black children born to unmarried women. These Black single male parents represent a special case because large numbers of them chose to fight for custody of their children in a divorce case. Instead of boarding the child out with relatives, or remarrying quickly in order to have a caretaker, they chose to recognize their own nurturing instinct.

Even when men become single fathers, they avoid many of the problems endemic to single mothers. Whereas the single mother is ranked rather low among all female eligibles, the divorced father is often regarded as more appealing to women. He is viewed as a model of stability and responsibility because he showed he cared about his child. Considering the popular image of Black men as not being interested in children, the relatively rare single father is a very attractive figure to many single women. Caring for their children also indicates they are good providers. At the same time they share the liability of many single mothers. Many women who like the glamour of dating and free-spirited activities find the single father's child care responsibilities unappealing. While this is truer of the free-floating single woman, even other types think twice about a serious involvement with a man who has a 'ready-made family."

From a male perspective there are other advantages to the solo parent role. He does not have to pay the cost of expensive dating activity since he can always claim he cannot secure a baby-sitter. Many women will come in and cook for him and the children. Because his interaction with the opposite sex is often confined to his domicile, sexual seduction is facilitated although he may have the same rules of sexual propriety in his home as the single mother. One of our single fathers claims that he did not allow women to stay overnight after a sexual interlude. Of course, it allowed "him" to avoid the kinds of commitment to a woman that many seek and the childless single male finds harder to elude.

Because the single father is so rare and seen as such a heroic figure, he receives more sympathy and support from friends and relatives than would ordinarily be given a single mother. People customarily assume a woman's status as a solo parent is normal or her own fault whereas they impute to single fathers a peculiar martyr status. Many of our single fathers claimed they met most of their potential sexual partners through their children. Once a woman seeks a permanent arrangement with a single father, she will attempt to do it through his children, playing with them, cooking, making them clothes, etc. Some men avoid this possibility by limiting their involvement with the child.

As we mentioned earlier the single male parent shares similar problems with the single mother. His movements are restricted, much of his time must be committed to the child and his role as a bachelor must be subordinated to his role as a father. Moreover, when looking for a mate he must pay special attention to her motherly qualities as well as the other attributes men seek. Any intensive involvement with a woman carries a special risk for him. Unlike the single mother's male lovers, his female companion will most likely become

very involved with his children. Thus, the disruption of the relationship means more than losing a girlfriend, it can mean the loss of a maternal figure for his children. All in all, his lot is still a lot brighter than that of the solo female parent.

Children impinge on a burgeoning romance in a number of different ways. This is true even for the formerly married male whose children do not live with him. Certainly, he does not face some of the problems that characterize the lives of single mothers. A typical response to our question about how a child affects their dating opportunities was made by a 34-year-old social worker: "They don't affect my life as a single in any way. They live with their mother." Still, for the responsible male parent, there are subtle intrusions on their single lives. Even the former husbands of successful career women are expected to contribute to the financial support of children after a divorce. This drains away a male's economic resources which he could expend on his current lover. It should be noted that the costs involved in supporting a child are spread over a longer period of time for middle-class Black parents. Unlike the lower-class child whose parental support is generally terminated by the age of 18 or younger, the middle-class parent is expected to provide his/her child with a college education. For this reason some single women find the formerly married male less than desirable. A number of them reported that a male lover wanted to delay or avoid marriage because of his need to support children by a former marriage.

Again, for the sensitive divorced father, some of his time and energy must be divided between a lover and his children. This becomes a thorny matter, in particular, during the holidays. A never-married, young college professor talks of the pain she felt when her current lover went off to

Canada to visit his children during the Christmas holidays. Subsequently, she found herself at a New Year's Eve party alone and met another man. Due to her feelings of loneliness and rejection, she responded to his seductive gestures and had intercourse with him that night. Women are also aware that men who have children by a previous marriage still remain in contact with their former wife. This 29-year-old probation officer told us: "Usually, the women you are with are very jealous and don't want you associating with your former wife. And, if you spend more than the required time to pick up your child, you are going to be accused of getting too "social" with your ex-spouse." This problem of retaining ties to a former spouse is relatively rare for the single father who has his child living with him. Generally, he is raising and supporting the child alone with the former wife totally out of the picture.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN

In the case of single mothers the needs of their children are much more than a minor consideration. They, in many cases, are the major consideration. While children may represent a structural impediment to unrestricted dating opportunities, they are also central to the process of forming and maintaining a significant relationship with a man. A serious candidate for the mother's affections must often meet the approval of an older child. In the words of a 36-year-old college administrator: "Our relationship is such that she feels free to make comments and give her opinion of the guy I may be dating. Everytime my daughter makes negative remarks about a man she has been right. She has an exceptional ability to judge people and their intentions for a child. Everytime I've not followed her advice the relationship has not worked. She is very aware of the way men treat me."

While some children may be perceptive in their evaluation of a mother's dating partners, they are also known to make invidious comparisons. Several factors besides keen insight can enter into a child's assessment of the mother's lover. He may be seen as a competitor for the mother's scarce time, energy and affection. Children living with only one parent often become accustomed to monopolizing her time and attention. The perception of a male intruding on his/her turf can lead to acting out behavior, jealousy and destructive acts. A 36-year-old claims representative refrained from any dating because: "I felt it was easier to wait until my child was old enough to understand or had left home rather than go through the competition that was sure to be involved."

Another factor that can color the child's perception of the mother's lover is his/her tie to the biological father. Many children retain a desire to have the estranged couple reunited. A serious candidate for the stepfather position threatens that fulfillment of that hope. Sometimes a child will engage in sabotage. Witness the case of a young boy who reported his mother's boyfriend to the police for smoking marijuana. Another single mother reported her sons would constantly barge into her bedroom when the lover was there. Then, they would deliberately call him by the name of another one of the mother's male friends. Still, the child's ability to relate to the male dating partner is paramount. If there is an extreme incompatibility, the mother may be confronted with the possibility of abandoning her child or terminating the dating relationship. Given the society's norms regarding the maternal role, the outcome is fairly predictable--though no less painful.

A serious dating partner will soon find himself immersed in the mother-child unit. After a few preliminary dates, their activities will become

more family centered. This will happen partly because the working single mother will have a limited amount of time to devote to dating and spending time with the child. In some cases single mothers use the male's involvement with the child to escalate the relationship. The transformation of the dyad to a family unit legitimizes a relationship and establishes an aura of permanence to it. A male's reluctance to become involved with the child ipso facto gives the relationship a less than serious definition. As one woman, a 29-year-old nurse, proclaims: "There is no such thing as a man loving me only. We come as a package. Either he learns to love me and my children or we have nothing in common. He has no alternative."

If an eligible male is accepting of a woman's children, there are still problems to be resolved. There are, for instance, no clearly defined norms for the role of a male involved in a long-term relationship with a woman who has children. Assuming the absence of marriage, the male has no legal authority or responsibility for the child. The biological father may retain his filial rights although the child's affection may be transferred to the surrogate father. Hence, questions arise about what he should be called, daddy or Joe, how the children are to relate to him vis-a-vis the biological father, etc. Should the male dating partner have children of his own, serious problems can arise when they come together on special occasions. Some of these problems are common to stepparents in general but the lack of a normative role definition complicates the process of forming a reconstituted family.

IMPLICATIONS OF EXTENDED FAMILY NETWORKS

The role of a single parent is a difficult one. They are often entrenched in a situation where the need for economic and sociological support systems is

acute. Where possible the extended family constitutes the most important support system for single parents. When they live in close proximity, extended family members may be parental surrogates for children who are lacking one parent. Since the missing parent is most likely a male, grandfathers, brothers, uncles, and male cousins provide a vital link to the child's perception of the male world; his role, behavior, attitudes, gestures, etc. It is even possible that children who are free to relate to extended family members have an advantage over those youngsters who are primarily confined to the nuclear family. A child who lives only within the nuclear family must find love and support from two adults or none at all. The child who can relate to an extended family network has a much richer variety of roles from which to choose.

Whereas many of our single parents did not live in the same geographical location as their family, this does not necessarily mean that the crucial functions of an extended family network were not carried out. Through the use of the mail and telephone, many of them maintained a frequent contact with family members. Single parents continued to receive emotional support through a phone call or letter. Clothes and money were sent via the mail and a sympathetic ear was only a phone call away. The children would often spend holidays and summers with relatives. In this scenario the father can remain a significant figure for the child. Middle-class fathers, in particular, continue to take an interest in the children and their welfare. Among the lower-class group, he is still regarded as a friend of the family that may be called upon for assistance.

While the extended family provides a variety of services for the single parent, a most important one for our group of middle-class divorced mothers is

the caretaker role. Even when mothers have the economic resources to hire a baby-sitter, they are more comfortable with a family member taking care of their child. When the caretaker is an older family member they provide more than a custodial service. They expose the child to a sense of history and inculcate in him/her an understanding of their roots. Through such inter-generational interaction the child maintains a continuity of culture which is crucial to the formation of a Black identity. Such a helping pattern serves to relieve the multiple burdens placed upon single mothers. Both she and her children are helped by being allowed time away from each other. It serves to reduce resentment of the children by the mother who may chafe at the burden of being a solo parent. And, it can wean the child away from an unhealthy dependence on the mother as the sole source of his life being.

The problem for many single parents is that extended family members are too far away. Genealogical ties, at least for the middle class, seldom dictate a choice of residence. Extended family members are often too far away to ease the daily problems faced by single parents. To satisfy that basic human need, establishing networks that transform friends into family is necessary. Among our single parent group, other women formed a valuable fictive kin network. Known as play sisters, they exchanged goods, advice and baby-sitting services. Complications in the dating relationship sometimes excluded male partners as pseudo-kinsmen. In such cases platonic male friends, whom the women considered more stable, served such a role and could be called upon for a variety of services.

SUMMARY

The results of our study reveal a mixed picture of the middle-class single mother's life in the dating game. She is disadvantaged by the multiple

demands placed upon her as a mother, worker and dating partner. Balancing off those demands and achieving success in each area presents a formidable challenge. It is made no easier by the fact that society and men are often not very sensitive to the unique character of her situation. The child expects her full attention as a mother, her employer demands a full day's work and men assume that she can fulfill all the normal functions of a dating partner. Some of these role conflicts can be buttressed by a supportive network of family and friends. In some cases the biological father takes very seriously his nurturant role after he has left the physical environs of his family. Males who choose to date a single mother may be sensitive to the constraints on her time and energy and help her overcome some of the problems of role overload.

While the problems we have described in our earlier discussion can be formidable, many of our single parents are in a healthier space than their childless peers. They have, for instance, become much more accepting of their unmarried status than other single women. Some do so because they realize their value may be low in the singles market. On a subterranean level they might wistfully hope to find a loving and responsible man to help lift the burden off their shoulders. Still, they are carrying out essential functions which are very important because there is only one parent. They are raising children who may be no less happier because the father is absent. Indeed, most of our single mothers feel their divorce was a net gain for their children. Since they are not plagued by the economic problems of lower-income single parents, there is little reason to believe the children in such families will turn out much worse than children in two-parent homes. While the children may not fare as well as those raised by two happily

married parents, they are probably better off than children in a home with unhappily married parents. Many of our single parents cited the absence of conflict and tension, and felt that they had a better feeling about themselves and their children.

All things being equal, we would prefer to see Black children in a home with two parents. There are certain inherent limitations to the single parent family. Children can assuage some of the problems of loneliness which seem to be rather acute for our free-floating singles. But, they cannot relieve the affectional and communication needs of adult women. We are particularly concerned about those single mothers who have retreated into their family and ceased relating to men. This deprives not only the mother of certain satisfactions that come from a healthy heterosexual relationship, but denies the child a positive model for close relationships outside the family circle. Such a child may find it hard to be liberated in later years from the parental tie.

Regardless of individual or societal preference for a two-parent family, it appears that the single parent unit is the wave of the future. It is obvious that the causes are more than economic, although the bottom line is the lingering effects of racism on our family structure. Since it is a family arrangement that will be with us for the foreseeable future, it behooves us to address the problems that arise from this situation. We cannot continue to regard single parent families as a form of deviance when their sheer numbers presage that they will be the dominant form of the family in the twenty-first century. It is incumbent of social planners and others to develop support systems for those women and men who attempt to raise their children alone.

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